

THE BOOK OF

# ACTS



FIRST  
BAPTIST CHURCH

## MAJOR THEMES OF ACTS

Jesus' statement of the Great Commission in Acts 1:8 is the key text in the book of Acts, highlighting the two main themes: the Holy Spirit and witness. Jesus' disciples become his witnesses after the Holy Spirit comes on them, beginning in Jerusalem, moving to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. This sequence provides an outline for the book of Acts. Below are some of the themes that gain prominence in the book of Acts.

**The priority of evangelism.** From chapter 1, where the Great Commission is recorded (1:8), right up to the end of the book, the great activity that dominates this book is evangelism. The two major methods used in evangelism in Acts were the winning of attention through miracles and apologetics. All the messages recorded in Acts had a strong apologetic content. The evangelists sought to show that Christianity withstood the questions that the people were asking, and the records of the speeches indicate that their evangelism was strongly content-oriented.

**The power of the Holy Spirit.** Many have felt that Acts should be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." The first chapter records the promise of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5, 8), the second his descent, and the rest of the book his work in and through the church.

**Community life.** Acts presents a vibrant community that was passionate about mission, with the members caring for each other, pursuing holiness, and dealing with matters that affected its unity. In the description of community we also see Luke's characteristic concern for the poor (which is more pronounced in his Gospel).

**Teaching.** Not only is teaching presented as something done with Christians, in Acts it is also part of the evangelistic process.

**Prayer.** Fourteen of the first fifteen chapters of Acts (ch. 5 excepted) and many of the later chapters mention prayer. In Acts, as in Luke's Gospel, prayer is a key theme.

**Breaking human barriers in Christ.** In keeping with the geographical order presented in the Great Commission (1:8), Luke shows how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. In this process Gentiles are saved. He describes the way the church handled that witness as well as other social differences among Christians, leaving us with the strong impression that human barriers were broken in the early church and giving us reasons why that is so.

**The place of suffering.** Like much of the rest of the New Testament, there is much reflection on suffering in Acts. Here the suffering faced by the church is mostly on account of opposition to the gospel.

**The sovereignty of God.** Allied to the emphasis on suffering is the underlying theme that God is working out his sovereign purposes even through suffering. This is the dominant theme of the passage that describes the church's reaction to the first experience of suffering (4:23-31).

**The Jewish reaction to the gospel.** A surprising amount of space is given to attempts of the church to evangelize the Jews and to Paul's perseverance with this task in spite of many disappointments. Acts begins with the apostles' asking Jesus when he will restore the kingdom to Israel (1:6) and ends with an affirmation that because of the hardness of the hearts of the Jews, the gospel is being taken to the Gentiles (28:25-28).

**The legal status of Christianity.** Luke is eager to give the impression that the Roman authorities did not consider Christianity to be a dangerous or illegal movement. Acts also contains examples of the eloquent defense of the Christians' faith before the state.

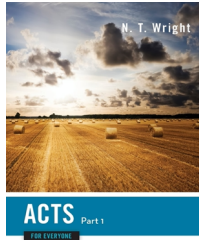
## ACTS AS A RADICAL CHALLENGE TO TODAY'S CHURCH

Contemporary Christians who read Acts with an open mind will find themselves challenged with pointed applications by what happened in the early church. I will mention only a few here.

- To a society where individualism reigns and where the church also seems to have adopted a style of community life that "guards the privacy of the individual," the early church presents a radical community where the members held all things in common.
- To a society where selfishness is sometimes admired and each one is left to fend for himself or herself, Acts presents a group of Christians who were so committed to Christ and the cause of the gospel that they were willing to sacrifice their desires for the good of others.
- To a society where pluralism defines truth as something subjective and personal, Acts presents a church that based its life on certain objective facts about God and Christ - facts that were not only personally true but also universally valid and therefore had to be presented to the entire world.
- To a society that denies absolute truth and therefore shuns apologetics and persuasion in evangelism in favour of dialogue, Acts presents a church that persuaded people until they were convinced of the truth of the gospel. Instead of aiming at mutual enrichment as the main aim of interreligious encounter, as many do today, the early church proclaimed Christ as supreme Lord with conversion in view.
- In an age where specialization has hit evangelism so much that we rarely find churches that emphasize healing also emphasizing apologetics, Acts presents a church where the same individuals performed healings and preached highly reasoned, apologetic messages.
- In an age when many churches spend so much time, money, and energy on self-preservation and improvement, Acts presents churches that released their most capable people for reaching the lost.
- In an age where many churches look to excellence in techniques to bring success, Acts presents a church that depended on the Holy Spirit and gave top priority to prayer and moral purity.
- In an age when many avenues are available to avoid suffering and therefore many Christians have left out suffering from their understanding of the Christian life, Acts presents a church that took on suffering for the cause of Christ and considered it a basic ingredient of discipleship

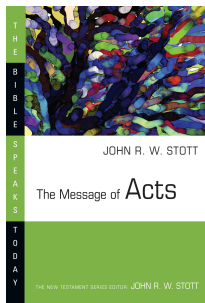
*Adapted from  
The NIV Application Commentary on Acts  
by Ajith Fernando*

## HELPFUL BOOKS ON ACTS



### *Acts for Everyone*

N. T. Wright  
Two volumes  
Westminster John Knox Press  
2008



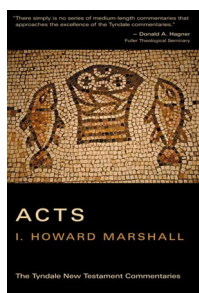
### *The Message of Acts*

John R.W. Stott  
Two volumes  
The Bible Speaks Today  
InterVarsity Press  
1990



### *Acts: Witness to Him*

Bruce Milne  
Focus on the Bible  
Christian Focus  
2010



### *Acts*

I. Howard Marshall  
Tyndale New Testament Commentaries  
InterVarsity Press  
1990